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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ADDIS ABABA 003016

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DEPARTMENT FOR AF, AF/E, AND INR/AA
LONDON, PARIS, ROME FOR AFRICA WATCHER
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SUBJECT: ERITREAN OPPOSITION GROUP SEEKING NEW OPPOSITION
ALLIANCE

Classified By: Political Officer Ted Harkema for Reason 1.4 (b)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY. On October 3, Polcouns and Poloffs met with Eritrean National Salvation Front (ENSF) Chairman Amb. Abdella Adem and ENSF Foreign Relations Director Dr. Beyene Kidane to discuss issues related to the Eritrean political opposition. Both leaders emphasized that their priority was to see the Eritrean Democratic Alliance (EDA), the umbrella organization for Eritrean opposition groups, reformed after it broke apart in February 2007. Abdella hoped a new congress of all Eritrean opposition groups could be held later this year. The leaders also reported that EDA military training camps in Sudan had been closed at the request of the Sudanese government and moved into northern Ethiopia where they received limited training from the Ethiopian military. Abdella characterized the Ethiopian government as an advisor to the Eritrean opposition and asserted the groups received only limited financial support from Prime Minister Meles. Abdella speculated that, in the event of a change in the Eritrean regime in the near term, Eritrea would fall into chaos as the current disarray within Eritrean opposition groups leaves no functioning alternative to govern the country. Lastly, Abdella reported that Meles had told him on October 2 that Ethiopia did not want war with Eritrea unless provoked, but that in all practicality the Algiers Agreement no longer existed. END SUMMARY.

EDA FRACTURED, NEEDS RESTRUCTURING

¶2. (C) Abdella reported the ENSF's priority was to help restructure the EDA after it fractured in February 2007 when the EDA members were unable to agree on a common political program. Abdella expressed his hope that an EDA congress could be held later this year and that various parties support the idea in principle, but noted no one was doing any planning for such a meeting. Beyene added that due to differences among groups, the foundation of a new alliance would have to be based on the minimum common denominators among the parties. He noted a minimum program of four key points: 1) the members should be committed to peaceful democratic competition between themselves while jointly struggling to oppose the Isaias regime, 2) the members should be committed to the establishment of a democratic Eritrean government, 3) the members should be committed to free and fair elections, and 4) the members should agree to abide by the decision of the Eritrean people.

EDA TRAINING CAMPS CLOSED IN SUDAN, OPENED IN ETHIOPIA

14. (C) When queried about military training camps, Abdella replied that the EDA had closed their training camps in Sudan at the request of the Sudanese Government and moved them into Ethiopia. Abdella said he had recently met with Salah Gosh, the head of the Sudanese National Intelligence Security Service, in Khartoum and that because of the improved ties between Sudan and Eritrea, Gosh instructed the EDA to close their camps and told them to keep a low profile in Sudan. The EDA member organizations have not been expelled from the country, the ENSF still maintains four offices in different parts of Sudan, as do other Eritrean opposition parties.

15. (C) Abdella said the EDA groups now received instruction from Ethiopian military personnel in two military training camps in Tigray located in close proximity to Ethiopian military camps. The ENSF, Eritrean Revolutionary Democratic Front, and an Afar group trained at a camp in eastern Tigray near Adigrat, while a number of other groups trained at a camp in western Tigray near Adi Hageray. He said the training was part-time for only 3-4 weeks at a time. Approximately 40 ENSF fighters participated. He characterized activity at the camps as refresher training for existing Eritrean military opposition units. Abdella asserted ENSF fighters regularly conducted cross-border intelligence gathering missions in Eritrea within the Temporary Security Zone usually in groups of two or three fighters, but they avoided engaging Eritrean army units whenever possible. Abdella noted that due to limited support

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networks within Eritrea, such reconnaissance missions were unable to go much beyond 30 kilometers from the Ethiopian border.

GOE AN "ADVISOR" TO ERITREAN OPPOSITION

16. (C) Abdella remarked that on the political front the government of Ethiopia served as an advisor to the Eritrean opposition, but the Ethiopians did not interfere in internal opposition politics. Beyene asserted the Ethiopian government did not give substantial financial support to the EDA, but only provided housing in Addis Ababa and assistance with other living expenses. Abdella commented that Meles had given the EDA access to one radio station in Ethiopia that broadcast into Eritrea and divided the airtime between opposition groups. Ethiopia had also recently offered an additional radio station to Eritrean opposition groups to broadcast all-day into Eritrea, but it was not yet operational.

MELES TELLS ENSF ETHIOPIA WILL NOT START WAR WITH ERITREA

17. (C) Abdella stated he had met with Meles for more than two hours on October 2 and that Meles told him he does not want war unless attacked. Meles further remarked that Ethiopia would not repeat past mistakes unless provoked by Asmara. Abdella claimed Meles recognizes that while Isaias is certainly working to provoke conflict, Meles does not yet believe that Eritrea would start a war. Abdella noted that Ethiopia can survive the status quo. Meles also stated that in all practicality the Algiers Agreement no longer exists, but Meles did not know what would happen next. Meles told Abdella that the United Nations Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea (UNMEE) probably would remain beyond the November 2007 boundary demarcation by geographical coordinates and the January 2008 mandate renewal, although the mission might be downsized. Meles underscored that if UNMEE were to leave,

the chances for war would greatly increase. Meles also told Abdella that UNMEE's presence does not preclude war, but only reduces its possibility. When asked what might happen in Asmara if Isaias' regime should fall in the near term, Abdella was clear that the resulting power void would result in chaos as no one within the current regime would be able to retain control as Isaias has and the opposition currently remains too fractured to adequately provide a functional alternate for governance.

COMMENT

18. (C) The ENSF appears to be a small and impotent opposition force and Abdella is almost certainly down playing the difficulty of creating a political consensus among the more than dozen Eritrean opposition groups. Abdella and Beyene declined to discuss Meles' plans and intentions for the Eritrean opposition in detail, but it is apparent that Meles is attempting to facilitate the emergence of a unified political opposition that could possibly be projected into Eritrea in a post-Isaias government. If the Eritrean opposition groups are able to organize a new congress, Washington may want to consider supporting it with funding or possibly sending representation. END COMMENT.
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